

CAPITOL STUFF

STATINTL

by TED LEWIS

Washington, Dec. 2.—President Johnson's presentation of the \$50,000 Fermi Award today to Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer has political significance. It serves to show one of LBJ's great advantages in the upcoming election.

The President cannot be criticized for participating in the ceremony honoring the nuclear physicist who was held to be a security risk nine years ago. That is because today's White House presentation was planned before his death by President Kennedy. The new President was obligated to follow through.

The fact is that Johnson cannot be a prime target of partisan controversy because of what happened while he was Vice President, both in the Oppenheimer incident and in other decision-making of far greater importance.

Republican Party leaders are well aware of that and realize that in 1964 they must develop issues out of what the new President does in his own right in the 11 months before the November election.

This is a distinct political advantage for the President, although it was certainly never planned that way. As Vice President he was reported "in" on all the big decisions of his predecessor. Yet, because his role was never emphasized by the White House—even sometimes mysteriously deemphasized—he is now peculiarly not vulnerable on this count.

It doesn't take the Republican National Committee researchers to find this out. The record is an open one, and scarcely ever does Johnson's name crop up as a key one in any of the momentous and controversial decisions.

In the April, 1961, Bay of Pigs fiasco, the targets of criticism were many, but they did not include the then Vice President. The joint chiefs of staff were assailed, as were CIA officials, including then chief Allen Dulles. President Kennedy himself shouldered full responsibility at that time.

When Nikita Khrushchev put up the Berlin Wall in August, 1961, and the U.S. hesitated in its response, partisan criticism was aimed at Kennedy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

Johnson's Role Was Never Emphasized as Significant

The steel price crisis in April, 1962, was almost wholly a Kennedy operation—by the President and his brother, the Attorney General. Johnson again was outside the area of partisan criticism.

When racial violence erupted in Oxford, Miss., in September, 1962, this was another crisis handled totally, it appeared, by JFK and his brother. At the time the Vice President was at the LBJ ranch in Texas. None of the onus for that crisis attached to him.



Arthur Schlesinger Jr.
He could clear up the mystery

While the then Vice President's views were sought and wanted in the October, 1962, Cuban missile crisis, he was never listed among the key figures in that crucial decision making.

Similarly, in the Bay of Pigs prisoner exchange negotiations and the more recent Viet Nam crisis, Johnson's role was never emphasized as significant.

It is to be hoped that Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the historian who has been in the White House as a Presidential adviser since 1961, will at some time help clear up mystery concerning the extent of Johnson's participation in the decision-making.

At times it appeared that it was carefully planned to have the Vice President's name kept in the background. Last May, we recall, when the Kennedy Administration ordered 8,000 troops to readiness posts near riot-torn Birmingham, Johnson was at a lawn party here. None of the prominent Democrats present had been informed in advance of the action.

The Need of Avoiding a Kennedy-Johnson Tag

At that time we wrote in this column:

"One explanation for Johnson's sideline role is interesting and has a certain merit. He is going to be needed in 1964 to keep the rebellious Democratic South from a wholesale switch of its electoral vote to the GOP, and his usefulness to that end would be nullified if the troop decisions had a Kennedy-Johnson tag on them."

On this general subject, however, President Johnson has been most sensitive in the past. He has insisted that he was in on far more hush-hush decision-making talks at the White House than ever came to light. There is no reason to doubt this. The point is that his name never leaked out as one of those whose views led to a specific Presidential decision.

There is no argument, however, that as Vice President, Johnson's loyalty to every Presidential action was superb. Nor is there any argument that today he would defend all of Kennedy's decisions.

But Republicans know it will be difficult, if not impossible, to launch any kind of bold attack on him on the issue of Cuba, the Berlin Wall or the handling of the race troubles in Birmingham and Oxford. And, while they cannot make Johnson the target for what happened before he became President, they still have to accept a public image of him as the strong right hand of the man he succeeded in the White House.

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